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Manning, William Thomas, Bp.

The present crisis in our nation's life

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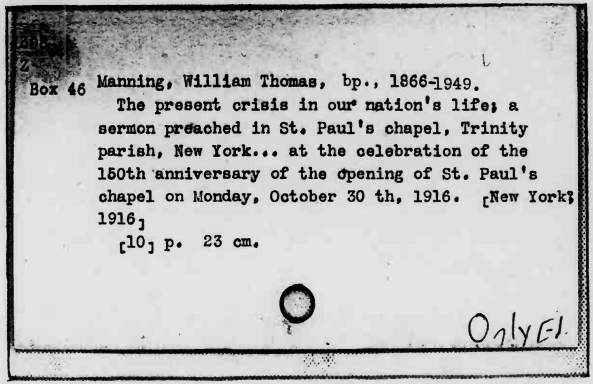
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The Present Crisis in Our Nation's Life

A SERMON

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Preached in St. Paul's Chapel, Trinity Parish, New York

BY THE RECTOR
William Thomas Manning, S. T. D.

at the celebration
of the 150th Anniversary
of the opening of St. Paul's Chapel
on Monday, October 30th, 1916.

Published by Request

THE PRESENT CRISIS IN OUR NATION'S LIFE.

What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? St. Mark 8:36.

We are gathered here to commemorate the opening of this Chapel for public worship, which took place ten years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, on October 30, 1766, one hundred and fifty years ago to-day. The occasion is one which stirs our hearts both as Americans and as Churchmen.

This service speaks to us of the conspicuous part played by members of the Episcopal Church, George Washington among them, in laying the foundations of this Republic.

It reminds us of the place which the parish of Trinity has held from the beginning, and still holds, in the life of this community, maintaining among its nine Churches this Chapel of St. Paul, with Trinity, the Mother Church, close by, two of the chief glories of New York, standing on their ancient sites, with their historic graveyards about them, where lie not a few of our country's most honored dead.

It was not by accident, but by Providential ordering that these two Churches were placed where they now stand. In an age of change they speak daily to countless thousands of that which does not, and cannot, change, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to Whom we pray, Whom we worship and adore, in Whom we put our trust, because He is God Himself. In an age when the power of money seems to know no limits, men see here daily before their eyes two sacred enclosures which all the money in the United States cannot purchase, and which business cannot crowd out, because they are held for higher and holier uses.

And this anniversary service calls up before our minds a century and a half of the City's progress, and of our life and growth as a nation.

When this Chapel was built New York was a town of less than twenty thousand people. The building of St. Paul's Chapel was regarded as a wild and unwarrantable venture. We read that the good burghers of that day "scrupled not to comment with just severity on the folly of that visionary set of men, the Vestry of Trinity Church, who had put so large and ornate a building in a place so remote and sequestered, so difficult of access, and to which the population could never extend." In a document published in 1880, it is recorded that "the late Robert Morris, of Fordham, remembered when a lad walking into the country, from Queen (now Pearl) Street, to see St. Paul's Chapel." King's College, erected ten years earlier, in 1756, which stood a little to the north and west of this spot, was described by a visitor from England as "pleasantly situated near the city of New York, on the bank of Hudson's River." In 1776, the first Trinity Church was destroyed by fire. For twelve years St. Paul's was used as the Parish Church, and to this building, in which we are now assembled, George Washington came, on April 30th, 1789, in accordance with a resolution adopted by Congress, for the religious service which completed the ceremonies of his inauguration as President, the service being conducted by the Chaplain of the Senate, the Right Reverend Samuel Provoost, Bishop of New York, and Rector of Trinity Church.

Here, on that memorable day, our first President came and knelt, together with the Vice-President, the members of both Houses of Congress, and all who attended the inauguration ceremony; and hanging on this pulpit as I speak, loaned to us for this service by the Marine Society of New York, is a banner which was carried before him in the procession.

You are familiar with the many historical facts and associations which make this building a national shrine, a sacred monument of our life as a people, and I need not dwell longer upon these. Since that day when Washington and his company entered these doors, there have been changes far outstripping all their powers of vision. Little could those who then assembled at St. Paul's imagine that its 150th anniversary would see uncounted throngs passing this building in the "Elevated" on its one side and in the "Subway" on the other, the streets crowded with motor vehicles, men flying and fighting in the air, messages flashed direct from our shores to the countries of Europe, and vessels of war able to make invisible passage to our coasts, travelling far beneath the surface of the seas.

Our wealth, our numbers, our vast extent of territory, are all serving to increase the problems which we, of this day, have to face, and our unparalleled mixture of races, whatever its possibilities for the future, constitutes a present danger, the reality of which we have recently, and reluctantly, been compelled to realize.

This nation is not one people as it was when Washington sat in that pew yonder. We are not one in birth or tradition, or even in speech. In the block in which I live in this city, the newspapers sold along the street are none of them in the English tongue.

We depend for our unity upon the highest bond of all, the bond of a great and common ideal, the American ideal of Democracy, Equality, Justice and Freedom. Far more than in the case of any other nation our life is based on loyalty to our national ideal. Upon this our strength and unity are staked. Whatever hurts or weakens this, strikes at our very life as a people.

And we are living at an hour in the world's history when the souls of nations, our own among the others, are being tested and tried as they have never been tried before. These two years past have been years of moral and spiritual opportunity without precedent. In this day of trial the nations of the earth, our own among them, have been, and are, showing their real attitude towards the greatest issues for which men can live or die. By her course in the face of this situation our country is being judged. This is a time of crisis in our national life, and there are certain things which I feel bound to say on this occasion, basing them on the text which I have chosen, which, without any strain upon the meaning of the words, may be rendered "What shall it profit a nation if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?"

1. As I look back over these two fateful years, viewing them not at all from the political standpoint, but simply as an American citizen who loves his country, and reverences her ideals, I cannot feel that we have risen to the measure of our opportunity and of our just responsibility. Doubtless a number of reasons for this may be adduced. Into these I do not go. That would not be within my province here. This matter far transcends all merely political considerations. It is a question of our spiritual life as a people. The pulpit may speak on such a question as this with a detachment which might not belong to the utterances of those engaged in the field of commerce or of politics. I simply declare what I believe to be the fact, that we have fallen short of that which, in the light of our ideal, was rightly to be expected of us as the greatest of the neutral nations. In this hour of the world's emergency, we have, perhaps, been neutral, but we have not been great.

Other nations have suffered untold sorrows and losses and are showing marvellous spiritual development. We have prospered materially, but I fear we have suffered grave spiritual losses. It is right that we should be neutral, so far as this is consistent with loyalty to our principles and our ideals. But this does not mean that we are to have no convictions upon such issues as those at stake in this war, and that we are to feel little concern in a life and death struggle for those eternal principles of right upon which our own life as a nation depends. A neutrality which involved this would be only a name for cold and callous selfishness. The Statue of Liberty stands by our shores with uplifted torch; but in this hour when law and liberty have been threatened as never before, can we say that it has been our one concern to stand, at all cost, for the fundamental rights of mankind, or are we as a people disposed to ask only that our own peace shall not be disturbed? It has not in the past been the way of America to sit indifferent to the struggle for justice and freedom anywhere. Our indifference to the principles at stake in this world crisis, our failure as a people to be moved by deep moral indignation at some of the deeds which have been committed, may well cause grave misgiving to those who love this land. For a nation, as for an individual, there are situations in which to sit in silence, to refrain from bearing witness, or to stop short of using every means to make that witness effective, means grievous hurt and peril to the soul.

2. I fear that partly as a result of our coldness to the great issues involved in this world struggle, we have suffered some real weakening and loss of our national spirit. I fear that there is to-day among us a perceptible lowering of our national tone and lessening of our moral power.

We need a great reawakening of the spirit of true Americanism, and a great reconsecration to our national ideal. There are influences at work to-day which are operating definitely to weaken the spirit of patriotism. The word Pacifism has come much into vogue in recent time. If by Pacifism is meant only a desire in every way possible to remove the causes, and lessen the likelihood, of war then we are all of us in sympathy with it. In this sense our most earnest Pacifists are the officers of the United States Army and Navy, who know what war means, and who would be the first to give their lives if war came.

But if by Pacifism is meant the teaching that the use of force is never justifiable, then, however well meant, it is mistaken, and it is hurtful to the life of our country. And the Pacificism which takes the position that because war is evil therefore all who engage in war, whether for offense or defense, are equally blameworthy, and to be condemned, is not only unreasonable, it is inexcusably unjust.

The effort to identify the Christian Religion with Ultra-Pacificism is a misapprehension of the truth and an injury to religion. The Christian Religion no more enjoins us to leave our shores unprotected against some brutal but efficient invader, than it enjoins us to leave our homes unprotected against murderers and thieves. If the Christian Religion meant that we are not to protect those dependent upon us, and to make every effort to do this effectively, then I say that normal men everywhere would reject the Christian Religion, and they would be justified in doing so.

But the Christian Religion holds up no such mistaken ideal. The Christian Religion is true to all the facts of life. Our Lord Jesus Christ does not stand for peace at any price, but for righteousness and truth, first, and at all cost.

No one in this country wants war. As never before we see its cruelty and its horror. By every means that may be we want to see its likelihood lessened and its causes eliminated. But evil as war is there are still deeper evils. Bodily comfort, physical safety, material prosperity are not the greatest things in life. War may hurt and kill the body. There are things that hurt and kill the soul. Every true American would rather see this land face war than see her flag lowered in dishonor, or her name touched with disgrace. Every true American would rather see this land involved in war than see her false to those principles of right, of freedom, and humanity upon which our life is built, and upon which the hope of the world depends.

3. We need in every part of our land, and among all classes of our people, a great reawakening of our sense of the responsibility which rests on us as citizens, of the duty that we owe to our country, and of the service that we owe to the State. In every true citizen of a republic there must be something of the soldier spirit, the spirit of self-sacrifice, of devotion to duty, of willingness to give time and strength and, if occasion require, life itself, in the service of his land. This spirit is of our very soul as a nation, but it seems to be less strong among us than it once was. It does not seem to burn in the hearts of our people as it once did. There are many of us whose thought seems to be far more of what our country owes to us, than of what we owe to our country.

And on this notable anniversary, in the presence of the representatives of our government, speaking with all possible care and deliberation, I wish to say that, not only from the standpoint of a citizen, but from the standpoint of a Minister of Religion, whose duty it is to advocate only that which is for the highest moral and spiritual good of our people, I believe there is nothing that would be of such great practical benefit to us as Universal Military Training for the men of our land. The assertion that this would lead us into Militarism need not be seriously considered. This assertion is made by those who are opposed not only to Militarism, but to any adequate measures for Military preparedness. The danger of a democracy is not that it may be carried into Militarism, but that it may be found unprepared to defend itself against militaristic aggression.

I advocate Universal Training because of its military effectiveness. It will make our land practically secure against invasion.

I advocate it because it is the only Military system that is truly democratic. It puts all on one common footing. Its effect is a people trained and prepared for their own defense.

I advocate it because it will weld our nation together and help to make of our many races one united people.

I advocate it because of its moral and spiritual value. It will give us needed discipline. It will develop in us those high qualities of orderliness and system, of respect for authority, of obedience of law, which are not the strongest points in our national character. It will tend to make our young men better Americans, better Citizens, and better Christians.

4. Last, and more than all else, because it underlies all these other things and is the foundation and source of them all, we need among our people a great renewal of the spirit of true religion. Religion is the only firm foundation for national life. This is true of the life of any nation. It is true above all in the highest form of national life, a Democracy, such as our own. Our courts, our laws, all our institutions, rest upon public sentiment, upon the right moral principle of the people. And every thinking man knows that the only real basis for right moral action is religion. Democracy rests upon the assumption that the people are to be ruled and guided by God's Will. A Democracy, if it is to endure, must be in fact a Theocracy. Then, and then only, will it be true that the voice of the people is the voice of God.

However excellent his services may be in other ways, no man or woman is doing his true part as a citizen of this republic, unless he is bearing open witness to his faith in God, and contributing his personal share towards the religious life of the nation.

It was George Washington who said: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle"..... "To the distinguished character of Patriot it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of Christian."

May we, as true men, do each one his personal part towards the strengthening of religion among our people, and may there be in our land, at this tremendous moment in the world's history, a great flaming forth of that spirit of true Americanism which shall make the name of our country respected by all, which demands, not first that America shall be commercially prosperous, not first that America shall be kept out of trouble, but first, and far above all else, that America shall do right, that America shall bear her fearless witness, that America shall do her true, brave part in the world, let consequences be what they will. "What shall it profit a nation if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?"

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